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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH NEW CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP

Reftels: A) 04 Hanoi 2009, B) Hanoi 580, C) Vatican 454, D) 04 Vatican 1988, E) Vatican 142

1. (SBU) Summary: In a meeting with the Ambassador April 25, newly appointed Archbishop of Hanoi Ngo Quang Kiet said that Vietnam's new Ordinance on Religion and its implementing decree appear to allow more openness for the Catholic Church, but that the Church has yet to test this. The Church wants to expand into more educational and healthcare activities, but its request to open a charity clinic in Ho Chi Minh City was turned down. The Catholic seminary in Hanoi has been allowed to expand and to start enrolling classes annually as of 2005. Catholics in Vietnam and the Vatican appreciated gestures by the GVN at the passing of Pope John Paul II and the naming of Benedict XVI. The Holy See plans to raise the level of representation in its annual official visit to Vietnam. The GVN remains cautious on relations with the church, however. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Archbishop Kiet had recently returned from Rome, where he was a member of a Vietnamese delegation led by Ho Chi Minh City Archbishop Cardinal Man, and also including the bishops of Thai Binh, Bui Chu, Phat Diem, and My Tho dioceses. Cardinal Man had stayed on as an elector of the new pope, while the others had returned after the funeral of John Paul II. The Chinese were represented in Rome only by a number of seminary students, Kiet noted. He told the Ambassador that the Catholic Church is growing in Vietnam, "especially in urban areas." "Thanks to U.S. and other international pressure, there is increased religious freedom in Vietnam." Kiet acknowledged that his own elevation to Archbishop required approval by the GVN, however.

3. (SBU) Addressing to Vietnam's new Ordinance on Religion and its implementing Decree (Refs. A and B), the Archbishop said that opportunities for religious organizations appear to be "more open," but that the Church has not yet scheduled any activities that would test the new legal framework. The Ordinance provides enhanced opportunities for the Church to conduct charitable activities. In a meeting with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai shortly after being named Archbishop, Kiet had "insisted" on the engagement of the Church in education and healthcare activities. Currently, it is only allowed to operate kindergartens and small "health stations." The PM responded that the Church is now approved to engage in healthcare activities. However, according to Kiet, Cardinal Man of Ho Chi Minh City had requested permission to open a charity clinic, but this was refused two weeks ago. The Ambassador commented, and Archbishop Kiet agreed, that this appeared to be a case of local officials moving more slowly than Hanoi. The Ambassador pledged to raise this matter with the Minister of Health.

4. (SBU) Archbishop Kiet discussed positive developments in the Church's ability to train seminarians. The Hanoi Seminary will for the first time begin classes yearly this September, and has also received permission to physically expand at a new site near Hanoi. Previously it had been restricted to new classes every other year. No other seminaries have been authorized to hold yearly classes, however. The Hanoi Seminary now has 240 students enrolled in its seven-year course, and will bring in 50 more this year. The Church hopes to open two new seminaries: first in the south, followed by one in the north, but no dates have been set.

5. (SBU) Despite the improvements, Kiet expressed frustration about Government controls' creating an imbalance of priests. The Hanoi Seminary must train students from eight dioceses, while northern Vietnam's other seminary, in Vinh, draws from only two. Although the Hanoi Seminary is larger, the end result is that it can only train seven new priests per diocese each year, while Vinh can train fifteen. Obtaining GVN approval for priests to be ordained after their graduation is now "rather easy," however. The Church has not yet requested moving priests from the south to the north, where the shortage is greater. The Ordinance appears to allow this, and the Church will try to do so "later this year." Kiet also noted the Church has a number of outstanding disputes over property seized by the State, but said these will be "very difficult to resolve."

16. (SBU) Turning to Vietnam's relations with the Vatican, Archbishop Kiet said that the Holy See "would like to establish official relations" (Ref C). In the Church's view, ties appear to be warming. The GVN made positive gestures by offering condolences upon the death of Pope John Paul II and congratulations on the appointment of Benedict XVI. The Vatican's annual delegation to Vietnam has been delayed by events in Rome, but it may take place in June. The Church hopes that Cardinal Sepe, Prefect for the Evangelization of Peoples, will be approved to lead that delegation. (Note: Previous delegations have been headed by Vatican Deputy Foreign Minister Pietro Parolin - Ref D. End Note.) Furthermore, Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs intends to send a delegation to Rome for discussions. Nonetheless, Archbishop Kiet speculated that the formal establishment of ties would depend on "the international situation," including U.S.-Vietnam relations and the situation of the Church in China.

17. (SBU) In a separate meeting on April 19, MFA Western Europe Deputy Director Ngo Tien Dzong told Poloff that the GVN has "received warmly" twelve delegations from the Vatican since the "principles of their interaction" were defined in a 1990 agreement. The Vatican has "sometimes respected these principles, and sometimes not," however. Specifically, in "many cases," the Vatican has not consulted with the GVN before naming bishops and archbishops. For example, Pope John Paul II named Archbishop Man of Ho Chi Minh City to be a Cardinal in 2004 without consulting with the GVN first. (Note: Archbishop Kiet's appointment was approved in advance with the GVN, and we know of none other than Man's that did not receive GVN approval. In the past, the Vatican and GVN had disputes over some nominations, however, and many bishoprics have remained leaderless for years. End Note.) Dzong explained that the GVN has a "difficult history" with the Vatican, which "was opposed to our independence." The establishment of formal relations was not raised during a recent meeting between National Assembly Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Vu Mao and Vatican officials in Rome, other GVN sources told Poloff. (Note: President Tran Duc Luong was quoted in media reports earlier this year as saying that, "It's only a question of timing to officially establish diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the Vatican" - Ref E. End Note.)

MARINE